



Presentation

Sherry Simon

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2e semestre 2005

Traduction engagée
Translation and Social Activism

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/015743ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/015743ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Simon, S. (2005). Presentation. *TTR*, 18(2), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.7202/015743ar>

Presentation

How is translation a site of activism? Consider the contribution by Lawrence Venuti to a recent issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* ("The cracked glass", TLS June 30, 2006, p. 15) in which Venuti speaks out against American monoculture. He notes that a decline in the importation of foreign culture "has coincided with the rise of the US as the most powerful nation in the world, and the supremacy of a foreign policy that justifies decisive intervention into other countries' affairs, whether economic, political, or military." He wonders whether the will to achieve global dominance has been "nurtured by the exclusion of foreign cultures at home." In denouncing America's difficult relation to multilingualism—following an increasing number of American academics, Mary Louise Pratt foremost among them—Venuti makes a connection between a generalized reluctance to integrate foreign cultural products and a period of unbridled American militarism abroad—and encourages translation as a practice fostering cultural openness.

Venuti's form of activism, which is sustained by a coherent program of work as a theorist and practitioner, is to be contrasted with other expressions of activism within the Translation Studies community. In June 2002 Mona Baker committed a sadly notorious gesture when—in the name of progressive political activism—she excluded two Israeli members from the editorial board of her journal, *The Translator*. While many supported her goals as an activist scholar, few approved of the means which she took to express her goals. By making the Israelis stand-ins for their nation and by excluding them from intellectual conversation with their peers, Mona Baker committed a gesture which promoted a perverse logic. By excluding these two individuals (who were personally and actively opposed to Israeli military policy) Baker denied the possibility of internal opposition to national policies. Would there be a rationale for condemning or excluding Lawrence Venuti as a representative of U.S. foreign policy?

What made Baker's gesture particularly unfortunate was the fact that she expressed her views through the vehicle of her own scholarly journal. There is a desirable collusion between translation studies as a discipline and progressive social and political agendas. But this collusion must be based on principles of scholarly solidarity. Translation studies uses the circulation of translated texts to question the dynamics of power across cultures—and to denounce the imbalances that

result. Baker and Venuti take up from such eminent forerunners as Antoine Berman and Walter Benjamin, for whom translation must disrupt rather than confirm the self-sufficiency of national cultures. For Baker to “pin” translation scholars to their national origins, to use them as tokens, was therefore all the more disappointing. Her gesture needlessly divided the community of translation scholars.

Because translation studies as a discipline has been affected by the very public reaction to Mona Baker’s actions, it is appropriate for the discipline to closely examine the way that activism is expressed through translation and through translation studies. The contributions to this volume suggest a wide array of means through which translators inflect their activity—and through which translation studies scholars formulate their views. In addition to public debate in the manner of Venuti (following a number of scholars promoting more open attitudes to language in the United States), intervention takes the form both of theoretical interventions and textual practice. Translators exercise influence both through the texts they choose and the manner of their transmission. That there exists an organization called “Translators without borders,” that a recent international conference had as its title “Translation and Intervention” (South Africa, July 2006), testify to this recognition.

As Salah Basalamah notes, it has become trivial in translation studies to say that there are no neutral translations. In the translation of complex material, translators inevitably leave a trace in the result. To speak of social activism is to point to specific situations in which this intervention is shaped by a pattern of beliefs, by an identity, by a desire for solidarity, by a social or political program. Over the course of the twentieth century, cultural politics has involved the struggle for the recognition of collective identities, based on nation, language, social class or gender. Translation has become an ally in representing, reinscribing or reinforcing these identities. The cultural politics of translation in the 20th century are largely associated with the struggles for decolonization and for political rights that erupted most visibly in the 1960s—and from which emerged worldwide movements for First Nations and aboriginal rights, feminism and recognition of national minority groups, and, later, specific socio-political identities such as Dalits and Adivasis in India. Translations contribute to these struggles by reanimating a neglected past, by valorizing marginalized languages or text-types (such as oral literature) and by introducing innovative texts into the new language system.

This issue focuses on translation as a means to promote progressive cultural agendas. Translations are a form of engagement when the necessary partiality of translation becomes *partisan*, when translators adopt advocacy roles in situations of socio-cultural inequalities.

In the contributions to this volume, social activism is examined as the everyday crucial role of cultural brokers among minority populations (Barsky on legal interpretation among Spanish migrants in the U.S., Clifford on medical interpreters, Klimkiewicz on community interpretation and the need for its theoretical and professional upgrading), and in relation to the transmission of socially crucial material (von Flotow on HIV AIDS prevention). A second set of articles examines translation as a response to the stereotyping and cultural oppression of colonialism (Ramamonjisoa on Madagascar, Leclerc on Acadie, Cardinal on First Nations translation). Activism is used as a somewhat ironic term in the article by Dash and Pattanaik to describe the actions of missionaries in Orissa culture, whose actions did not necessarily produce the results intended.

The issue begins, however, with two vigorous calls for activism in intellectual life. First, Robert Barsky calls for attention to the most vulnerable of populations in the United States—illegal migrants. Because of the vast array of discretionary measures that can be used in response to minor infractions, language is crucial. “How can we insert ourselves as linguistic translators at crucial moments, or legal interpreters in judicial settings, in order to provide at least a semblance of justice in the current juncture?” For Barsky, the activist shares the outsider status and the acute vision of the Shakespearian Fool. The professor in contemporary society can become an “activist” in similar ways, by using “prestige” from one realm to speak in another, a kind of “abuse” of power which can be put to different uses. Following Edward Said, Barsky argues that there is a special duty to address the constituted and authorized powers of one’s own society, which are accountable to its citizenry, particularly when those powers are exercised abusively. In our “perfect system,” says Barsky, illegal immigrants are “cheap and available labor that is always in the wrong, human beings who only have the rights we choose to accord, and only as long as we wish to accord them.” Their vulnerability is exacerbated by language. In the interviews that Barsky conducts, what becomes evident are the small details of procedure that exclude migrants from full rights in the judicial process.

Often the lack of resources and the sometimes poor training of translators can have pernicious effects—leading to tough sentences when a much lighter one could also have been handed out. Once incarcerated, migrants are liable to further arbitrary actions committed by officials with unclear levels of discretion who are dealing with populations from different cultures, often without proper legal counsel or proper interpretation. Barsky shows eloquently and persuasively, through the words of participants in the process, the ways in which the law can be applied in arbitrary or “care-less” ways. His examples reinforce arguments from Venuti, Pratt, Sommer and other cultural studies scholars that “from a general perspective, we need to promote and value bilingualism and multilingualism in all institutions in our society. We need in a concomitant way to value the diversity that immigrants bring to our nations. With this valuing will come the need on the part of individuals and institutions to recognize, acknowledge, and disseminate the importance of quality interpreting and translation and what that means. For this we need active training, recruitment and promotion of translation and interpreting.”

In his finely argued and suggestive piece, Salah Basalamah calls on translation studies scholars to leave their own intellectual borders open. Translation studies should be an arena where scholars engage with crucial issues of citizenship and through which translators can undertake “actions solidaires.” Arguing against the technicization of a discipline that from the start has prided itself on its identity as a trans- or inter-discipline, Basalamah wants translation to stand as a paradigm of the “interrelation of differences.” “La traduction des concepts d’une discipline, des sensibilités religieuses d’une communauté, des schémas mentaux d’un groupe ethnique ou social, de l’intelligence politique d’un peuple ou encore de l’éthique économique d’une culture ne peut être considérée comme une activité étrangère à l’action proprement traductive de transformer des significations dans des sphères de compréhension différentes.” Similarly, he challenges the idea that action, “engagement,” “activisme social” is opposed to textuality, citing Paul Ricoeur’s conception of the convergence or interdependence of text and action. An important element of his argument is the reconceptualisation of the translator as a citizen and therefore participating in the identity conflicts which he or she also mediates. This means adjusting the falsely dichotomous notions of “foreignness” and “home culture.” “Peut-être faudrait-il désormais concevoir la traduction, non plus dans son rapport avec l’étranger radical, l’étranger de l’extérieur, mais avec celui qui

parle la même langue, l'immigrant et ses descendants..." This new type of translative scenario is increasingly that of today's cosmopolitan cities.

Basalamah concludes with the greatest hopes for the discipline, hopes grounded in the responsibilities of the translator: "La traduction a-t-elle les moyens de contribuer à la meilleure compréhension des disparités de perceptions d'un phénomène aussi problématique que la place du religieux dans la société laïque de l'Occident postmoderne... Le « traducteur-citoyen » est donc celui dont la tâche, au-delà de la seule comparaison des langues et des cultures, consiste à s'engager – à visage découvert – à porter la responsabilité de la cité (aujourd'hui planétaire), à voir dans les textes qu'il traduit les visages de celles et ceux qui n'ont pas de voix et à se soucier de les donner à voir et entendre au monde."

The second set of articles is related to the particular asymmetries which result from historical inequalities between languages–inequalities due to colonialism or to the case of minority communities like Acadie in the eastern maritime region of Canada. Translation in the colonial context can often involve a shift across *genre* categories. Both the articles of Pattanaik-Dash and Patrick Ramamonjisoa take on the intervention of colonial translation and its unexpected effects. So doing, they illustrate the differences of colonial policy in regard to language (Ramamonjisoa underlining the French evacuation of Malagasy vernaculars from school, Pattanaik-Dash emphasizing the supportive role that missionary and colonial translation had on the renewed life of the Oriya language. In both cases, "activism" has a paradoxical meaning, because it refers to the "counter-activism" of previously colonized communities. In a nuanced study of the celebrated poet Jean Paulhan's translations of the Malagasy "hain-teny" form, Patrick Ramamonjisoa argues that there is an inevitable conflict between the outsider's desire for knowledge and the indigenous meaning-system. This conflict is part of a history in which simplifications and clichés are inherited and passed on—from the first missionary contact to the more sophisticated attempts at translation. Paulhan was at once critical of, but also part of, the French colonial enterprise. Colonialism is not shown in its spectacular form—as in the brutal disregard of général Gallieni for the Malagasy language and for its speakers—but in the small details—the fact that Paulhan chose not to provide explanations for the proverbs he translated. These decisions are part of the process of social and cultural normalization that perpetuate colonial ties. "Ces formes condensées de savoir, ce sont les jalons d'une normalisation sociale et culturelle... Les raccourcis cognitifs sont les barreaux d'une cage coloniale qui reste à

ouvrir.” Ramamonjisoa wonders whether in the long term translations that seem passive are not in fact more activist—in that they leave unresolved the categories of genre and the knowledges they provide.

In tracing a detailed history of missionary translation in Orissa since the 19th century, Pattanaik and Dash underline the paradoxical effects of Christian missionary action. The major result of their activity was to shape Oriya print culture and, as a consequence, a sense of the unity of Oriya-speaking peoples. Their prose translations promoted the use of prose literary forms (which had not existed before) and the conversion tale became the model for the Oriya short story. In addition, a stricter model of translation was introduced into a culture where translation had previously been practiced as a looser form of rewriting. “Thus, the activism of the missionaries in the field of translation had a long-term rather than an immediate effect. The immediate purposes of proselytization, such as the eradication of superstition from the society, the alleviation of poverty and the education of the natives were realized only in part. But, ironically, this effort consolidated the study of Oriya language, literature and national identity and generated an increased religious and cultural allegiance which was against the wishes of the missionaries.”

Philippe Cardinal examines the long and troubled history of the relationship between anthropology and First Nations, examining the parallel histories of aboriginal self-representation and translation. His final suggestion—that representations of aboriginal life be revealed as dialogues rather than monologues—is suggestive. His paper is especially interesting in questioning the motives not only of anthropologists but of aboriginal peoples in recounting their stories.

Catherine Leclerc explores one area in which the activism of translators has been perhaps more recognized than others. This is the use of vernaculars as an act of innovation or aggression—mirroring the intentions of the original text but deflecting them in relation to the target culture: “As a result, vernacular language serves as the perfect tool to exemplify a translator’s role as an agent, and perhaps even an activist.” The risks are high, however, as translation must search, as the original does, for “just the right distance” between linguistic conformity and innovation, between assimilation and differentiation, between ennoblement (standardization) and exoticization. Comparing the strategies of two translators in relation to *chiac*, the language of modern Acadie, Leclerc conducts a fine analysis of strategies and results.

Because both the written language and the translation strategies are still very much in flux, writers and translators borrow from one another. Leclerc reports that: “After reading Majzels’ translation without italics separating English from French, Daigle expressed interest in this difference from her own practice. Following Elder, Majzels decided to replace the term “Acadia” he was using in *Just Fine* by “Acadie” in *Life’s Little Difficulties*. As both the writing and the translation of Chiac progress as emerging phenomena, every strategy will constitute a new performance, which then in turn will bring about consequences of its own.”

In the following section, Luise von Flotow, Aurélia Klimkiewicz and Andrew Clifford discuss the ethics of interpretation in the context of healthcare. In discussing the translation of an HIV/AIDS-prevention program, Luise von Flotow shows how the visual aspects of the message ensure easy passage for the ad across cultures and continents. The animated figures are part of a globalized vocabulary made possible through the world circulation of Disneyfied America. Their macho humour, their easy gags, make for ready appreciation. But the circulation of the ads is impeded by an overriding factor—the fact that the Bush administration policies in favour of abstinence dictate funding priorities. Aid money is available to messages that support abstinence rather than safe sex as the preferred means of HIV/AIDS prevention. And so, as this example so clearly shows, translation is caught up in the contradictory dynamics of economic liberalization (the increase of trade worldwide) and of reactionary social policies (which restricts funding to those causes considered morally acceptable to the forces of conservatism).

Kliemkiewicz argues in favour of community interpreting as a full citizen in translation studies. The physical presence of the community interpreter is fully felt, and not minimized as in the case of consecutive or simultaneous interpreting. This physical presence—like the letters that appear on the screen of a dubbed film—brings the process of translation into full visibility. Using the idea of the “third,” borrowed from Bakhtin, she begins a process of theorization of the specificity of community interpreting which is long overdue within translation studies.

Beginning with the plausible scenario of a family confronting their father’s cancer diagnosis, Clifford advocates an interventionist role for the interpreter. However, Clifford defines the specific conditions that will allow the interpreter to act ethically. The interpreter cannot take on

this role without developing expertise in the communication tendencies that distinguish one culture from another, in the ethical principles that govern medical communication in different communities, and in the development of professional relationships in healthcare. These elements should be obligatory aspects of interpreter training.

While activism takes on a broad array of meanings and strategies in these articles, all the authors point to situations of discourse where there are discrepancies of power, knowledge or status. These discrepancies are not to be ignored or effaced through translation—but relayed through a coherent strategy of response.

Sherry Simon – Concordia University